

The House of the Worm



GARY MYERS

THE HOUSE OF THE WORM

by Gary Myers



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It is with special pride the publisher offers this first book by the young California writer Gary Myers. The imperially slim volume is an episodic novel, a collection of ten tales each a masterpiece of macabre fantasy structured to present the author's own special insight into the *Cthulhu Mythos*—what Mr. Myers calls “an interesting heresy.”

Brevity is the soul of Gary Myers' style; his viewpoint is mordant, ironic and always perfect for striking a note of chilling terror. Whether he is being ocularly descriptive as with “The House of the Worm” and “The Maker of Gods,” in which the unrelenting terror is established as if a report from the pupil of the eye transferred from pen to paper, or creating an abstraction of eerie strangeness as in “Hazuth Kleg,” Myers captures perfectly with few words the mood of cosmic horror.

With an introductory note by the author and fanciful illustrations by Allan Servoss, readers who appreciate the literature of macabre fantasy will find this novel worthy of leading them through the “gates between the dreamlands and our own world.”



GARY MYERS

THE HOUSE OF THE WORM

with illustrations by

ALLAN SERVOSS



ARKHAM HOUSE

SAUK CITY
1975

WISCONSIN

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Introduction

CHAPTER ONE of this book is not a major contribution to the Cthulhu Mythos of H. P. Lovecraft, as expounded by his friend and publisher, the late August Derleth, but it does present an interesting heresy.

According to Derleth, the central precept of the Cthulhu Mythos is that the evil Great Old Ones once made war on the benign Elder Gods, and were banished by Them to outer darkness, where they abide the hour of their resurgence. The body of Mythos lore recounts the modern manifestations of the Ancient Ones trying to return. The theme of resurgence is an important one in Lovecraft, and the Great Old Ones are his invention, though other writers have added to the pantheon; but the Elder Gods, with the exception of Nodens, are entirely the creation of August Derleth.

Only Lovecraft is scripture. Elder *Ones*, at least, are mentioned with Nodens in "The Strange High House in

the Mist"; but the Elder Ones are younger than infinity's Other Gods, who came to dance on Hatheg-Kla "before the gods or even the Elder Ones were born." And Kuranès, in "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath," identifies the Elder Ones with the Great Ones of Kadath, who carved their own anthropomorphic likeness on Ngranek. It was the Great Ones who banished the Gugs "to caverns below" because of their sacrifices to Nyarlathotep and the Other Gods. But the Other Gods are the ultimate gods even in the opinion of the priests of Nasht and Kaman-Thah, as Lovecraft states plainly. Probably the Great Ones had more than one reason for desiring to escape from Kadath, and Nyarlathotep for keeping them there. Protection by the Other Gods is refined cruelty.

This is all very far from Derleth, but also from the Cthulhu Mythos proper. Gates between the dreamlands and our own world are numerous but obscure, and developments there cannot change the pattern of the Mythos on this side of the seventy onyx steps.

The Great Old Ones of this book are the Other Gods and their affiliates, but the Elder Gods are only a somewhat optimistic appraisal of the Great Ones of Kadath. Man has frankly biased opinions about the ordering of his universe and the obligations of his gods toward him-

self; the gods, being mindless, have no opinions, or else they have found that obligations can be evaded successfully merely by swallowing whoever would call them to their attention. The cotters of Vornai are orthodox Derlethians, but the Worm is notoriously a skeptic.

—GARY MYERS

South Gate, California
April 1974

*The House
of the Worm*

CHAPTER I

The House of the Worm

THE HOUSE lies in ruin. Time and the elements have used it cruelly, and now have left it to perish dismally. They have left it to its loneliness; there is only silence in its empty halls, and the tittering of rats. The crumbling walls are effaced by leprous white fungi and scaly lichens; the dust of years lies thick on the rotting floors. The windows, once lit with a thousand twinkling lights, now are dark and boarded; all save two, and these are lightless as the sockets in a yellowed skull.

But for a single moment at evening, when the last ray of a dying sun touches on those two lozenge windows, the House wakes to stare into the night with eyes that shine red strangely long after the sun has passed, and perhaps dreams. Of what should a house dream? Of the past,

maybe, of the time when it was young, when colourful pageants of men and women passed like players on a stage, and lived their lives as lives should be lived, and died? Perhaps; but now only the rats live here, and such memories are but the frail ghosts of forgotten years, beyond recall. Indeed, for the House of the Worm they never existed.

The House dreams of older things. For the House is far older than the mouldering timbers and crumbling masonry, the silence and the dank mildew. These are old indeed, but they are built on foundations whose age no man remembers and no record tells. They are akin to the works of the Great Ones of Kadath maybe—those five monoliths of black stone, graven with maddening symbols and curious runes, set in the hill as on the five points of a star—but they were ancient when Kadath lay yet unquarried, ancient ere men ever crawled from the slime of abyssmal seas, ancient even in that unutterable time when the wise Old Ones guessed vainly at their origin. Their antiquity was only dim legend, and doubted as legends are, when the timbers and the masonry were first raised by that Old Man of Whom No One Likes to Speak.

Now there are many tales told of that old man and his queer ways, for the most part having little truth to them. Facts seem to alter with the passing of time, when no one remembers the truth; and but one man now lives

who attended that last banquet in the House of the Worm, and he is mad.

They say that he was not old when first he looked on the five pillars on the round hill overlooking Vornai in the plain of Kaar. He had held more contempt for the legends than fear, and had gone there alone to scoff at the daemons said to dwell within the ring. He went in the daylight, and would have returned long before dusk, for even his rash skepticism would not let him dare this thing by night. But the spell of the place caught him; or a morbid fascination of the way the monoliths' shadows curiously distorted all they fell across; and how these shadows were cast not by sun or moon, but red Betelgeuse in the starry sky. Or perhaps he guessed the meaning of certain cryptic signs on the stones, or only stood too long in their presence. He did not return at dusk. Rather he came with the morning breeze when eastern skies were crimson. He came as one bowed beneath the weight of years; and the people wondered to see his raven locks turned white, and wondered more at the odd light that shone in his eyes, the light that would never leave him. They wondered, and only whispered, "The daemons." He went slowly up to his cottage, speaking to no one, and was not seen again for a week and a day.

And the time passed quickly for the people of Vornai, and with it much of the amazement brought by the return

of Him of Whom No One Likes to Speak. But on the eve of the ninth day a great and terrible Fear prowled in the city's shadowed lanes, entwining the spires and minarets of the palaces and temples in webs of horror, or sending forth icy tendrils to snare the minds and souls of the unwary. The ground beneath them muttered queerly, and unguessed evils rode the wind. And inside none dared sleep for fear of evil dreams; but crouched trembling in the dark behind locked doors, while taloned *things* scratched at shutters and laughed, and eldritch lights flashed from the top of the hill where the pillars stand, with none to see save that old man.

An in the morning he took up residence in that great House now standing betwixt the pillars, where no house had ever stood before.

This they were willing to tell me in the city when I came to the plain of Kaar where all men fear the shadow of that House. It was only of that *other* matter that they were reluctant to speak. For these events are still too clear in their minds, though half a century old, and such is the horror of the memory that at its merest mention they seal their lips and go to count their beads and mutter prayers to their curious pot-bellied golden gods. And this is strange, for only three persons attended that last banquet in the House of the Worm, and of these but one now lives. They told me of him in the city when they saw that

I was determined to have the tale, and told me also that he was mad.

This greybeard, they said, had become a hermit, and had secreted his dwelling on the hill where the trees are thick and do not behave like trees; and now he spoke no more to men, but worshipped a curious fetish on nights when red Betelgeuse is obscured by clouds. But I found his cave by daylight when the stars cannot be seen; and he that spoke no more to men was at last persuaded to speak (with the aid of a skin of the heady red wine of Sarrub, whose like is not in the World), and then and there he told me this tale.

It was in the hundredth year of his residence at the great House betwixt the pillars that the Old Man of Whom No One Likes to Speak gave the first of his famous banquets. For a century he had kept to himself and within his House, and his only dealings in the city below were for provisions, for which he paid with antique gold coins of no known kingdom. But now, whether because he desired company or for some darker reason, his invitations to dine that evening at the great House betwixt the pillars were found one morning tacked to the front doors of all the houses in the city, and none could say how they came there.

It is a trick, some said, and any who go will be set upon

by creatures not good to imagine, and eaten for dinner instead of dining themselves. But some of the younger men were less sure. Who, they asked, has ever seen these creatures, or speaks with authority of the old man's appetites? He is a vampire, said the others, who owes his unnatural longevity to a diet of human blood; but at this the young men laughed, for while it was uncommon for a man to live a hundred years, it was seldom supernatural. "We will go," said they, and the others only shook their heads and looked sadly after them.

But in the evening as they trudged in file up to where the great House broods, all twenty of them doubted the wisdom of their choice. It was true that they did not believe the tales told of that strange old man and his queer ways, but they had heard the tales since infancy, and their hearts believed. Yet they did not turn back. And soon the night-songs of the insects grew strange in their ears, and they did not like the way Betelgeuse peered down at them from the heavens. And when at last the House came into view, their fears grew worse; for all the twinkling lights that burned in its many windows could not dispel the queerness in the shadows cast by those five pillars sticking out of the earth like the blackened finger-bones of a corpse in an ill-made grave. One man even fancied he saw a daemon squatting atop the nearest of these, and swore that it had no face where a face should





have been. And still they went on, and at last stood before the great front door. And though the colour and grain of the wood was subtly wrong, and the little carvings seemed to twitch in the uncertain light, one man rapped the heavy knocker thrice; and they were ushered by a slant-lipped gnome into a great, gloomy pentagonal hall, where an oak fire burned green, and into the presence of that Old Man of Whom No One Likes to Speak, but of whom so many tales are told.

And there they dined at a pentagonal table, from plates and goblets of antique gold all traced with the sign of the five-pointed star; and the purple hangings were stitched with that same sign in silver thread; and it was woven into the deep rugs, and carved on the wooden furnishings; and set above the lintels of the doors, and on the sills of the shuttered, secretive windows, were five-pointed stars of a curious grey stone. They dined, and heard their strange host speak, and returned in silence to the city.

And so this curious ritual went for many nights, without change—but fewer and fewer guests returned to the old man's House each night. Those who did not return had been frightened by that odd light which shone in the old man's eyes, and by the things he said when in drink; for when the wine cups had been filled for the third time with a vintage surpassing even the heady red wine of Sarrub, being not of the World, and the green fire burned low,

he would speak of things no sane man guesses. He told of the winged messengers from Outside, who fly on the aether even to the nethermost abysses of space, where violet gases sing hymns in praise of mindless gods; of what they bring from Yuggoth in the gulf, and what they take back for a nameless purpose. He revealed the secrets the night-gaunts whisper to those luckless dreamers they snatch from the peak of Throk, to drive them mad; and the appearance of a Dhole; and the meaning of certain rites performed in worship of the goddess N'tse-Kaambl whose splendour hath shattered worlds; and the blasphemous Word that toppled the thrones of the Serpent-priests. He traced the sign of Koth on the table, and told of things in the forbidden *Pnakotic Manuscripts* which if written here would damn the writer. Men left his House weeping or mad, never to return; all save the three, the braver or perhaps the more foolish, who came to the House of the Worm on that last night.

On that night, while the three guests dined in silence from golden plates, and the green coals on the hearth glowed fitfully, and the wine that surpasses even Sarrub had gone round for the third time, he called their attention to the sign of the five-pointed star emblazoned throughout his gloomy hall, and reminded them that the pillars without were set on the points of that same sign, the Sign of the Elder Gods. He spoke then of those little

gods, the present gods of Earth, whom men called the Elder Gods, by which was meant, the gods who love men, and to whom they prayed at evening. And he told how there were Other Gods before them, those Great Old Ones Who owned no master save only Azathoth, the daemon sultan, whose name no lip dares speak aloud. These had come down from the stars when the World was new, to infest and make horrible its dark and lonely places; but They were not wholly free of the stars, and when the stars were wrong They died, to await the distant time when the stars would be right again, and They might rise to shriek and revel and slay. They had already slept for unnumbered aeons when the Elder Gods came from Betelgeuse to find Them dreaming grotesquely and muttering Their dreams; and those weak little gods were afraid, and with a magic sent those hideous Ones into the keeping of hoary Nodens, who is lord not of the World but the Great Abyss, and bound Them beneath their Elder Sign forever. But there would come a time when hoary Nodens would sleep and forget his watch; and then would come those who would break the seals and the spells, and loose those horrible ravening gods who would not always stay dead. And the pillars marked the Sign of the Elder Gods, and beneath that Sign—

Suddenly the old man paused in his narrative. The silence that followed was oppressive, seeming even to suck

the breath away; yet clearly that old man with his glittering eyes was *listening* for something more! The others heard nothing, but in the single taper's light they saw that the old man was afraid. Then they heard it, that mad piping, wavering up from one of the cellars below; faint at first, but growing louder and wilder as the minutes passed; bringing strange visions of amorphous flute-players and howling daemons in pits of groping night. The guests remembered Azathoth, the daemon sultan, who gibbers unmentionably on his throne at the centre of Chaos, and something of the terror of their host was made clear to them; they shuddered. Then the old man rose, and taking the great candle from the table, whispered only, "Come!" and passed beneath a dark archway with carvings of hybrid monsters and stars. And because the three had drunk much wine, or because of some power in that one word uttered by their host, they followed him beneath the yawning arch.

Long they wandered down into those nighted regions of Stygian gloom where the moon and stars are mythical, down through the cellars and sub-cellars and still deeper. There were shallow stone steps leading down, and arches too low for the passage of men. Baleful-eyed rats watched them avidly. Deeper they went, ever deeper, and ever they heard that fiendish piping from below, and ever the old

man's light bobbed eerily before them, beckoning evilly. They passed by many corridors on their journey, above whose entrances were set signs that hinted of things even the Elder Gods have forgotten. These lightless halls drew the three despite the old man's persistent warnings, until in the end of one they saw the distant stars, and a dread chuckle wafted on a frozen wind to where they stood. . . . They looked in no more corridors. But hurrying on to a fork in the narrow way, they chose the left past a hoary altar in a circle of standing stones, and came quickly thence upon a boundless cavern, chasing the frightened shadows before them. Here the old man's light failed, and the shadows left their hiding places to resume their guard and conceal anew their age old secrets; yet all was not dark. For there was a well in that cavern, a pit so vast that its farther edge was lost to sight, and from its gaping maw a hazy light poured. Here was the source of the piping.

The old man went to the edge of the pit and looked into its depths. The lights played eerily across his wrinkled face, showing so well each ghastly expression that lived there. And as the three guests moved closer, he told them in croaking whispers scarcely audible above the daemoniacal flutes that *this* was the tomb where seethed and bubbled that unmentionable One; that ancient evil the frightened Elder Gods had sought to hide beneath a last

binding and senescent spell; that hellish reason he must keep the pillars and the Elder Sign inviolate forever. Nor would he fail that trust, lest the very curse of Nodens descend upon his head; not though the stars come right and the children of Azathoth rise from the nethermost pits of Hell—for were they not already risen? Had he not heard their great, sloshing footsteps in the bowels of the World, or felt the breath of their titanic wings? They came to open a Way for this abomination's return, even as the *Pnakotic Manuscripts* foretold and all men feared. Let them come! What could they ever hope to do while he, the Jailor, the Guardian of the Elder Sign, yet lived? He was screaming now, and his eyes blazed with a holy light. And before anyone even realized what was happening, something slithered up from the well like a river of burning pitch and swept that old man into the abyss.

CHAPTER II

Yohk the Necromancer

VERILY was it know to the good cotters of Vornai that Yohk, the fat-bellied clerk in the Street of Frogs, was a sorcerer of no little accomplishment; and when it happened that many of their number disappeared mysteriously and under curious circumstance, these same cotters were scandalously quick to lay blame at his dubious threshold.

This Yohk had entered the city, by way of the Gate of Mists, in the grey dawn of that morning three madmen came down the hill there is outside Vornai, shrieking disquieting things of shadows and the World's ending. The day is one of especial note to the purple-robed chroniclers of the city—though whether because of Yohk's coming or the madmen's is uncertain—and they still relate how the terrible history of the Old Man of Whom No One

Likes to Speak was muttered because someone remarked upon a startling resemblance between those madmen and the unfortunate three who never returned from dining at the old man's sinister House, and how Yohk listened avidly to those tales, and smiled. They tell too how it was Yohk who first advocated the destruction of that great House which some name the Worm's for no sensible reason, and particularly the breaking of the five shocking pillars that guard it. But the people did not like his soft flabby face and tiny eyes, and feared too the ire of strange gods.

Shortly thereafter, Yohk rented the abandoned temple of a lesser god in the Street of Frogs to dwell in, taking the clerk's trade for his own, but practicing frightful thaumaturgies at his leisure, as old wives attest. Where the madmen chose to live is nowhere recorded.

Now it was soon obvious to the indignant cotters that the fat clerk did not intend to behave at all properly, in those accepted patterns custom dictates. Yohk spurned the city's rightful gods, Nasht and Kaman-Thah, and worshipped an idol carved out of jade and set on a smoky crystal wherein fitful shadows danced—it looked for all the World like a squid with ears. And when priests of Nasht and Kaman-Thah came to admonish him against this wicked idolatry, Yohk only made a curious gesture with his left hand and laughed horribly. He had taken

something of the priests' that he kept imprisoned in a little ebon box and subjected to inexplicable tortures. And his appalling refusal to eat as other men gave rise to much speculation about his obesity, and whether he was mortal. Such speculation Yohk always found entertaining. And had the precise nature of certain visitors who came with the Moon been revealed, it is doubtful whether the gossips had dared utter another word.

So when a seller of myrrh disappeared one evening exactly two weeks before Walpurgis Night, it seemed only natural that Yohk should be blamed, and no one was surprised.

In years that are one with the dust, Yohk had visited that cryptic, yellow-robed One whose silken veil bulges damnably, and heard the voiceless oracle of Bokrug piping strangely of Sarnath's dreadful doom. He studied long with pale hands trembling in the mildewed scrolls of black magic and lunacy, bartered from the meeping, hound-faced ghouls who pilfered them from the shadow-guarded crypts of Leng. He sent his soul to gaze on the Vale of Pnath, and the grim onyx walls of Kadath in the Cold Waste where no man treadeth; where it pronounced the detestable runes graven there, and the unspeakable name of Azathoth, and in age-old corridors of madness searched frantically, until the ravening Guardians sent it

fleeing. At night beneath the wan Moon's leprous face he sloughed away the dust mercifully hiding that which sleeps in certain unhallowed graves.

And in these forbidden delvings he found again the spell that was lost with primal Ib, whereby men are transformed into spiders with maimed and broken legs; and how to invoke the dead, which is perilous, and how to clothe in flesh the spirits of them that never lived, which is infinitely worse. He knew signs that grant power over storms and supremacy over Hell's black legions. He learned how one might traverse those whimpering zones that lie beyond the nethermost dark stars. The seven thousand appellations of daemons he consulted, and the five hundred and fifty and five chants of the Dholes, and the scriptures of Dzyan and Klek—but the Word of unbinding, the Key that opens no door save One, he never found: the spell that if any in the World must free the Great Old Ones. For Yohk well knew of those Old Gods Who lay entombed and dead in the dark places of the World, and knew too that They would not always stay dead. Yes, Yohk knew! And so he prayed to Their images and sought ever that one Word, knowing that at its utterance his gods would be freed to reward Their chosen with the dark jewels of incredible wealth and power beyond the dreams of avarice, as is taught among those who expect to receive them and therefore must be true. But Yohk was certain now that

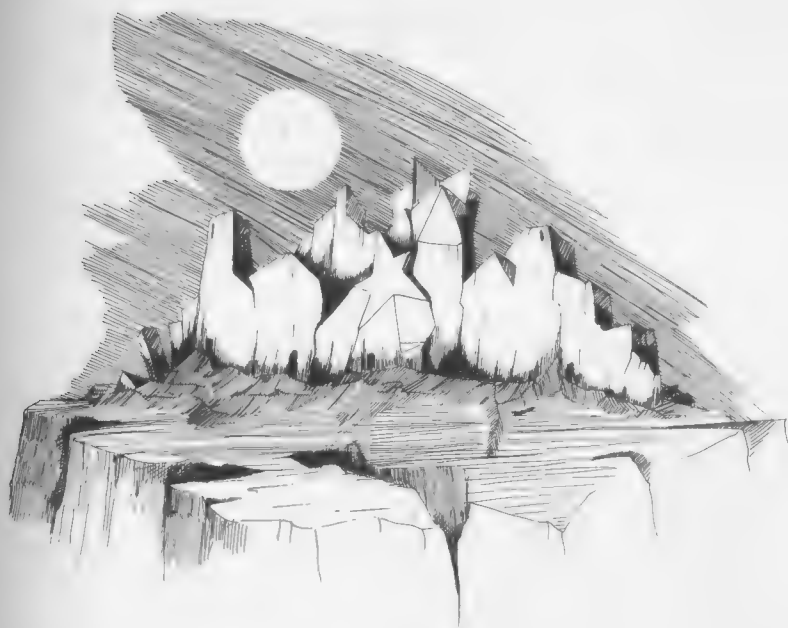
the spell he sought was nowhere in the World, and so he must search *behind* it. He would open a Way that *something* might pass through, something that knew things and would tell, for a price.

And at last, armed with his scroll and all the proper accouterments, he made his way by devious paths out of the city at evening, to the wooded hill that cotters shun who know the tales of that Old Man of Whom No One Likes to Speak, and know them to be true. It was not yet dark when he set out. But soon the stars crept out from behind the East and Night came like a furtive thing. Red Betelgeuse peered threateningly down through the sinister clouds, but the fat clerk paid no heed; he trudged on through the watchful, evil trees and brambles and thorns, up to that doubtful House where the rats hold blasphemous revels and chuckling, sapphire-eyed spiders spin crazily in the dark, and where Yohk had good reason to know his shocking god lay sleeping. He went in by the back door, picking his way very carefully over fragments of broken stone—grey stars that almost unsettled him—into that dim, pentagonal hall silent with Time's unprinted dust, where once a drunken old man spoke of dreadful things to his guests. And there in the dust Yohk traced those three charmed concentric circles as is prescribed in such matters, and lighted the black candle made from the fat of corpses, and spoke thrice the summons to

those beings who wait for just such purposes somewhere outside the World. And nothing at all happened.

So Yohk the necromancer swore wickedly and dropped his guards and stamped out of the House of the Worm, forgetting that not all things who come when they are called are readily seen, a fact which cannot be forgotten with impunity. And that night something followed him home.

Now when that unfortunate seller of myrrh was followed in the next two weeks by no fewer than ten of his neighbours, the cotters were understandably distressed; but there was something not wholly logical in their animity towards the flabby clerk. Certainly Yohk was never seen, only a gathering of shadows and a scream cut off with horrible suggestion, and somebody was missing who had not been before. Indeed, when these regrettable happenings finally ceased, Yohk seemed to have vanished quite as completely as the others. No more was he spied passing silently along the Way of Tombs as he was wont, or peering evilly at honest cotters from his window. In secret temples men burned incense and thanked the inscrutable gods. But there were others who whispered that the clerk had only shut himself away from prying eyes, to work some new blasphemy whose like had not been seen for many years more than a hundred, not since that infamous



old man raised up from Hell the House of the Worm. Indeed, these people pointed out, already had a winged devil descended from the Moon to light on the sorcerer's doorstep. Nobody seemed to remember that it flew away when no one answered its knock.

Soon Yohk's neighbours were complaining loudly of a frightful smell, and certain well-fed rats that had taken to skulking in the Street of Frogs by night and leering at pedestrians. At last the gaunt mayor and his five augurers, abetted in their plan by those vacant-faced priests who once found Yohk's laughter disconcerting, and hoped to recover their souls the sorcerer took, came armed with scrolls and holy periapts and chanting of the goddess N'tse-Kaambl whose splendour hath shattered worlds. They marched straight up the hated Street of Frogs from the Square of the Thirteen Pomegranates, singing of N'tse-Kaambl, and the plump rats fled scurrying. Right to that dubious threshold of Yohk they came—where it became necessary to wait on the doorstep until the intricate black lock would be picked—and muttering each a zealous prayer to his particular god, they entered and shut the door behind them.

Before many minutes had passed they all rushed frantically out again to cringe in alleys and less likely places, and would not willingly tell what they had seen.

But they found only a room with tapestried hangings

depicting old, slant-eyed faces and cryptic signs that clearly meant something unspeakable, and deep blue rugs sprinkled with myriad little jewels arranged in constellations no eye looks on in any gulf. Somewhere a languorous incense burned, and four curious globes of light floated serenely just below the high vaulted ceiling. On a table of graven ebony was spread a crumbling scroll; a silver pen was dropt to the stone flags as though from the writer's forgetful hand; the writer sat slumped forward on the table, very still. It was the unorthodox clerk Yohk, who had lost much of his flabbiness. So they left quickly, showing no proper respect for the dead, and sealed up the temple with the clerk still seated there, for none would touch him when they saw the look in his dead eyes. They did not even take away the eleven peculiarly marked bodies they found in the cellar.

CHAPTER III

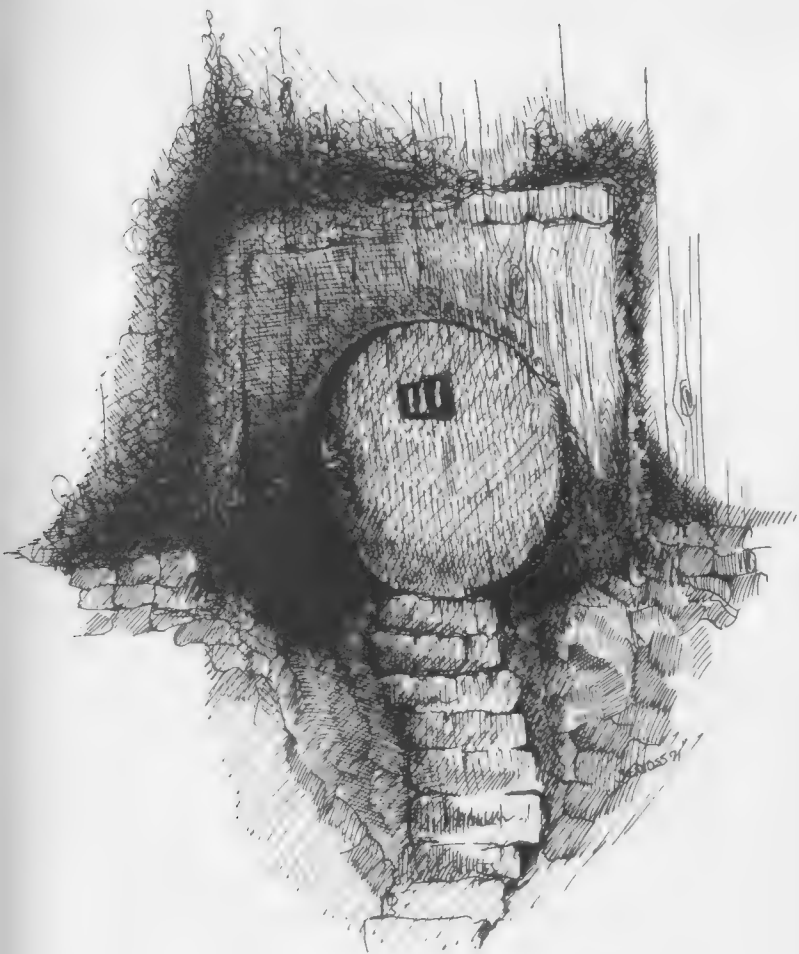
Xiurhn

OPPOSITE the grim onyx temple of Unattainable Desires, in the Street of the Pantheon in Hazuth-Kleg, sacred to the Moon, there stood long the low, terrible house of Skaa that figures oddly in myth. Skaa dwelt all alone in her terrible house and worshipped her carven idols, and chanted and lighted unwholesome candles and made the Voorish sign. But there are those who do not scruple to consult witches, and Thish was used to dealing with persons of doubtful character in his business, which was nothing less than robbery.

He had heard it whispered by certain jewel-merchants, before his knotted cords silenced them completely, that the gem of immeasurable worth is kept by the Night in fabled Mhor. He heard it first in Celephais, from a fat

jeweller seeking to buy his own life with that peculiar knowledge, and Thish had not trusted his whimperings. But in Vornai he was less sure, and in Ulthar's scorpion-guarded shops he wondered whether it might be true, and in the yak caravan on Kaar's sunny plain he could doubt no longer; the ruby-merchants who come to Dylath-Leen he robbed not. The truth and other pertinent matters, he knew, might be read in the mouldering *Pnakotic Manuscripts* wherein is recorded all things it is better that men should not know, but he did not wish to pay the Guardian's price to peruse that hateful tome. Less perilous would be to consult one who had already paid the Guardian's price.

In that low house shadows dwelt, despite the flickerings of a little oddly-painted clay lamp. Thish did not like the way those shadows behaved, and Skaa's eyes that shone like the nethermost stars of some nameless gulf were less than reassuring. He entered by that disturbing door which stands open at all seasons between dusk and dawn, and did what was expected of clients, and in turn was told what he wished to know. For beyond the unknown East, mumbled Skaa, there must certainly lie that great, silent vale which is the Night, whence he sends forth his shades at evening to slay the bleeding sun, and whither flee all dreams when the sun returns at dawning. And in that shadow-guarded vale (if one may believe the queer sayings



of them that mouth strange secrets to any who may hear) is the high, haunted tower of stone wherein the myth Xiurhn sits and mutters dreams to himself and watches over the gem of immeasurable worth. As no other in the World is this gem, for it was made by the craft of the Other Gods as supplication to the mindless daemon sultan Azathoth, and cut in a semblance of some droll blending of sloth and vampire bat whose pulpy, sinister head is slyly concealed behind its folded wings. It is better that mortals do not think of it, for the Other Gods are not as men (whose tiny souls are bound to them by silver threads), but find earthly focus in certain horrible links, and the noxious soul of Xiurhn haunts the Dark Jewel. It would not be pleasant to meet Xiurhn or his soul, and the Other Gods have shocking methods of punishment. Yet it is known that the yellow-skulled priests of Yuth possess a talisman they anoint in adoration of N'tse-Kaambl, that is useful in protecting those who would profane what belongs to the Other Gods. And Skaa told how one might come to Yuth and the talisman; and casting at the witch's webbed feet his payment in opals, Thish hurried out into the winding cobbled streets beneath the stars.

When Skaa opened the little bag and found only pebbles, for Thish was a robber of note, she drew a pattern known to the skull-faced priests of Yuth and nailed it to the brow of her messenger, who made an obeisance and

vanished in a rustle of leathery wings. She described then a sign in the dark with her forefinger above the worthless rocks to change them into opals, and gave no more thought to the thief.

In seven nights a stealthy shadow passed on stockinged feet through the third and most secret vault of that abhorred monastery where the priests of Yuth celebrate the mass of Yuth with curious torments and prayer. When the yellow-skulled priests found the strangled witch with the knotted cord still about her throat and the talisman gone from its proper place on the altar, they only laughed softly and returned to their curious tortures.

That even the East must end if one only travels far enough, all sane men know, despite what philosophers may say; but Thish on his journey watched the four seasons of Earth come in file down through the fields of man and the fields that know him not, come each and pass and come again. And queerer and queerer grew the lands as one rode further East. Beyond the last of Six Kingdoms Thish beheld the dark, mordant forests of trees whose knotted roots fasten like leeches to the mould and moan and bleach the earth, and in whose loathly shadows the inquisitive brown Zoogs caper and leer; and evil bogs whose pale, luminous blooms are foetid with swollen worms having astonishing faces. The deserts on the thither side of Gak

are all strewn with the gnawed, untidy bones of absurd chimeras. Thish spent a week in crossing those deserts, and day by day prayed to his gods that the gnawers might remain comfortably hidden. Beyond the deserts is the city it is not well to enter, for the portcullis mimes teeth entirely too well to be canny. And upon a time Thish led his famished zebra across the barren, stony ridge which is the East's farthest border, and peered down to see the Night lapping evilly below, a sluggish, viscid pool in fabled Mhor.

There he turned free his zebra. Already the bleeding sun failed at his back, and then sinister Night would rush terribly up from that vale with strange intent, and Thish did not need to be told what hellish spawn might lurk in the dusk athirst for that which he could ill afford. He lighted a little oddly-painted clay lamp that did not belong to him, and sitting down on a broad, flat rock, with his back to the stone and his jewelled sword at his side, he drew his cloak up to his eyes and waited. But Thish did not have to wait long. . . . For then with many a subtle flap and whisper the shadows sprang, amid a bitter cold of the star-spaces. An object with clammy feelers and wings splattered against his brow. Queer half-glimpsed shapes of nightmare clamoured just beyond his feeble light, he heard the brief, frenzied screams of his zebra out in the dark with the titter he hoped but did not really

believe was the wind. Ther that shadowy horde had wriggled obscenely over the high ridge and into the World beyond, and Thish was left all alone to creep down the treacherous slope, bearing his lamp before him. The very stones oozed a horrible dew of fluid shadows, and were pitted everywhere with fiendish burrows, and the burrows were not always unoccupied. Thish stumbled more often than he must have liked, for the little lamp could not dispel the blackness, only its vile children, and once his hand slipped down into one of the burrows. . . . Later he found those worn steps at the base of the tower, where something began to slither nastily behind him, snuffling in the dark and disturbing ancient bones. Thish was glad he could not see what he suspected. He could only gibber a meaningless prayer to the talisman in his pocket, and froth and scramble madly up the dizzy stair on his hands and knees in the dark, while the little suspicious noises behind him got bigger and bigger, and something wet twisted the lamp from his nerveless fingers and swallowed it with bestial slobberings and panted on his neck until his bleeding hands found the brazen tower door and pulled it shut behind him. Something knocked on the door and chuckled ominously.

Crouching there in the dark with his sword and mumbling to himself, of a Dark Jewel of immeasurable worth

kept by the Night in fabled Mhor, of amorphous Xiurhn, whose noxious soul it is, who sits in a high tower in the dark and talks with those Other Gods whose methods of punishment the thief had most reason to fear, but who cannot abide the talisman sacred to that goddess N'tse-Kaambl whose splendour hath shattered worlds, Thish in the dark of his own shattered mind never knew when that talisman left his fingers at the silent beck of the yellow-skulled priests. . . .

And then Xiurhn came downstairs with his soul to answer that persistent knocking.

CHAPTER IV

Passing of a Dreamer

OPENING into the narrow windowless alley behind the solemn Hall of Burgesses on the one side and the shop of Woth the baker on the other, in Ulthar that lies beyond the river Skai, is that hidden door whose existence is only suspected. It is said of this door that there squats behind it, on an altar of what the unimaginative think are merely human bones, that strange and dubious idol named in certain obscure references as the Keeper of Dreams. There it crouches in the dark behind that misleading door, patiently awaiting those who have always come seeking that which only that unlawful idol has to offer, and always afterwards it locks its fees away in a little painted box whose rumour disturbs the sleep of the gods. What those fees are the legends do not willingly say, hinting only that

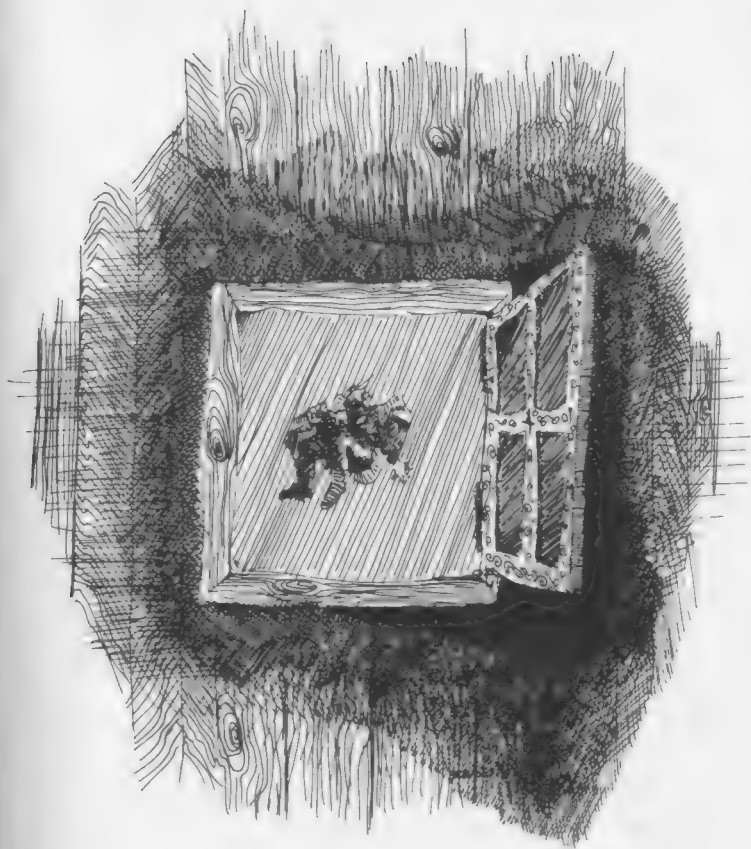
Snireth-Ko knew once; and the fate of Snireth-Ko remains a matter of grim speculation.

They still tell in Ulthar how once it was this same Snireth-Ko who prepared the incense burned at all hours in the left ear of the image Nasht to confound his perception, lest Nasht be angered perceiving that his worshippers are sinful; in his other ear they pray. And Snireth-Ko mulled the golden wine with an herb well loved by the temple cats, who yet touch it not, but accept gladly the proffered cream afterwards when the priests have lapped up the wine. But despite his profound knowledge of even these most sacred traditions of the mild gods of Earth, or perhaps because of them, in the end the mystery and the beauty of these traditions were lost to him, for his cleverness had discerned the nonexistence of the gods. And while Nasht with his brethren atop unknown Kadath guffawed at some wry jest and cared not for the affairs of men, Snireth-Ko turned away from his gods and went out into the lonely streets.

Whither his wanderings took him that night is uncertain, for only the graceful cats were there to see, and these would only sit and clean their whiskers unconcernedly, after the immemorial way of cats, that takes not into account the sad mutterings of disillusioned venders of incense kept from sleep by thoughts not good to have. Perhaps even Snireth-Ko knew not where his footsteps

would bring him. Something felt him there in the cobbled lanes, mumbling sadly to himself of the faith he had lost; for then a muffled piping drew him out of the night to that dim, evil-smelling alley mentioned elsewhere, and through the secret doorway where all such go in time, which something closed and locked behind him.

On the brick cylinders of Kadatheron many curious things are written, in archaic letters few now can read. There is revealed the madness that hungers in starless gulfs, the reason its own abominable spawn must flee to hostile worlds of light, blaspheming those worlds with horrible mockeries of form and substance. It was dark in that wide chamber which by all sane laws should be Woth's respectable shop and the winding street in which it lies; then a light was struck somewhere to fall upon the idol's shocking face, and Snireth-Ko knew where he was. That pale idol squatting obscenely on the altar of piled bones was more like a salamander than a leech, and its eyes were improperly placed. But Snireth-Ko did not like what it had in lieu of a mouth, and perhaps he should not be judged harshly for that one tiny scream. He well knew what services that idol offers, but he had heard unpleasant surmises about the fee that deceitful proprietor demands of clients. For it is told in Ulthar and in Nir, and passed by devious means throughout the Six Kingdoms, that what the Keeper of Dreams vends from its high altar is nothing





less prized than men's desires. All desires are goods in that infamous shop that should be Woth's, for in its farthest end is a window sorcerously opening on all the dreams that men may have. Whether the dreams are of poets or eaters of hasheesh makes no difference to that dubious idol. And when the idol's services are not required, the window overlooks only an abyss full of stars.

The daemon stirred its fretted wings, peered obliquely at its client, and smiled; and Snireth-Ko saw that he had been mistaken about the stars. Without that fabulous window lay all the bright opulence of wonder and incredible mystery he had lost with his faith, all the weird beauty, waiting to receive him, with pulsing vortices of scented flame and myths veiled in purple. And Snireth-Ko was wafted through the shimmering pane to the crystal dreams beyond. . . .

In what far clime he knew not, the dreamer trudged the viscous shore of some vast continent of weeds, wrenched from the murky depths of what nameless sea he did not like to think. Slimy things watched his passage with numerous glazed eyes; fantastic polyps menaced him with ropey tentacles and gnashed their frightful beaks and sank back into the churning water; still he trudged on through the green rottenness towards an unspoken goal. White mists shredded from distant spires and proud

minarets glinting emerald in the sun; and Snireth-Ko walked crystal ways between tall columns of figured glass, and riven temple-domes and cyclopean ruins of brilliant green, to a wide court where an emerald demigod banded with queer runes sat and stared unseeing at the stars. The dreamer too sought the stars and guessed what messages their cryptic winkings might convey, and shuddered. And when he heard that shocking moan from the god's weed-bearded lips, he leapt into darkness rather than hear what Name that image would pronounce.

In some dark necropolis of shadow-guarded Leng, he turned in haste and fear from the lurid fires of ghoulish feedings beneath the Moon, but followed after a silent, hooded shape loping through the shades of tombs and over sunken graves. Beneath a precarious lintel it vanished; but Snireth-Ko traced in the dust a sign whose meaning he could not know, and hurried down the broken steps to the lightless vaults beyond. And there with the gloating shadows for aeons he threaded the insane labyrinth of the tomb, fumbling in the dark and disturbing the rats and far less pleasant things with his breathing. At last his eyes, grown large with the unending night, found the light beneath a secret door. But something behind that door rattled its moldy claws and snarled, and made him think better of opening it. He turned back into the friendly dark alive with the titterings of rats.

But he was mad to suppose those evil lights were eyes; for in a third vision the haunted skies engulfed him in the starry aether, and bore him on spectral winds to that lonely ashen sphere of silence and horror and cold men name the Moon, never suspecting Who it is that lurks bubbling and blaspheming beyond the Rim in full view of the Moon's dark side. More delirious than that which the pale toad-things sliced and prodded with curious weapons as it bulged hugely from a sickening crevasse, or what carted the flesh sinfully away on disturbing wains, yet it was but the lowly Messenger of that Other: that shocking final peril which gibbers unmentionably outside the ordered universe where no dreams reach; that last amorphous blight of nethermost confusion who gnaws hungrily in inconceivable unlighted chambers beyond time amidst the muffled, maddening beating of vile drums and the thin, monotonous whine of accursed flutes; the boundless daemon sultan Azathoth. . . .

Snireth-Ko shrieked and fled madly back through dizzying gulfs of space, back to the World of glittering cities and light, back through a jewelled pane into that wide, dim cell of dubious transactions, where he saw how the idol had tricked him. The Keeper of Dreams flopped stickily from its altar and wriggled across the floor in a manner that must have revolted even the cabalistically

figured tiles, the painted box of astonishing rumour held open in one flabby claw. Snireth-Ko could not mistake what it is that the insidious Keeper hoards against the awakening of those Old Gods who possessed the Earth aforetime, for purposes of blackmail or perhaps to purchase unspeakable favours; neither did he guess wrongly the fee that slobbering idol now required of him; and he turned and plunged back through the charmed pane.

And the fate of Snireth-Ko remains a matter of grim speculation. Some believe that the idol was not cheated of its nameless fee, but snatched him back in absurd limbs from the dreams he hoped to hide in . . . and afterwards locked the little painted box and used the clean-picked bones to make its altar more comfortable. Others say that Snireth-Ko fell screaming into the starry abyss the window overlooks when the idol's services are not required, that he is falling even now. But in a dream of that alien city of grey towers and smokes, uncouthly named London by they that dwell there with pale, worried faces that come of too much brooding on unhealthy things, I found an old man cowering in an alley, who would only claw the sightless walls of brick with long, fleshless fingers, and mumble sadly of the faith he had lost and a fee he had not wished to pay; and in the ruin of his face hovered the thin phantom of him who made the incense once, in Ulthar beyond the river Skai.

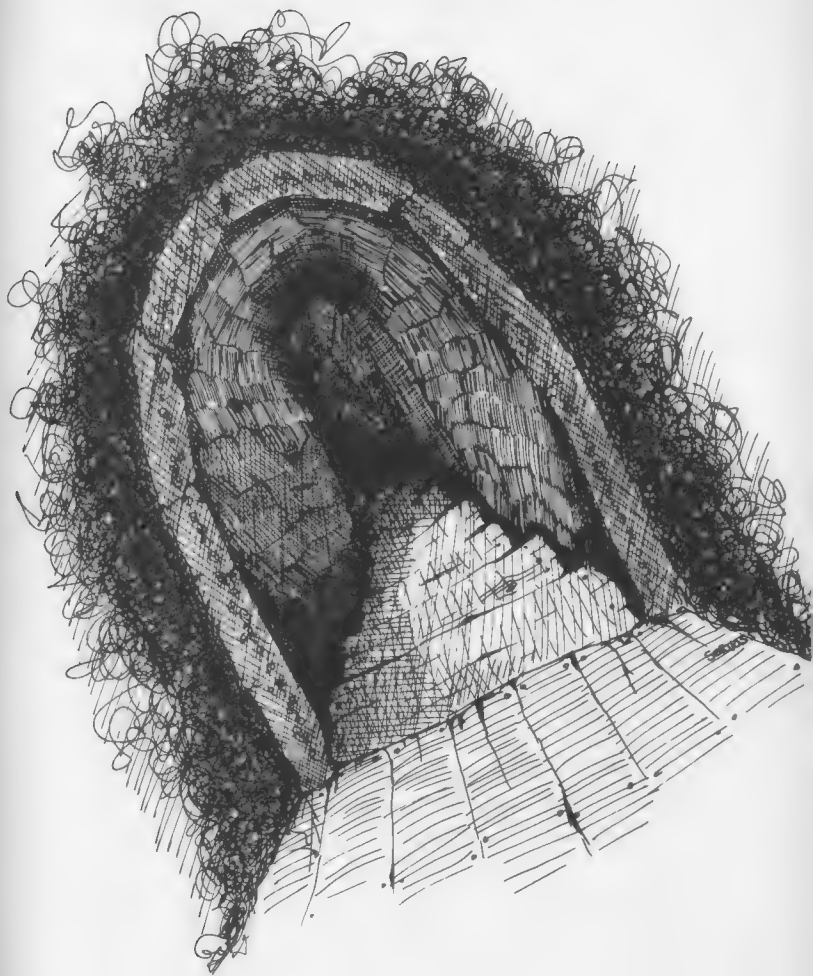
CHAPTER V

The Return of Zhosph

IN WHICH of the Seven Cryptical Books is forgotten, Hsan records this peculiar and exceedingly doubtful fact: that wisdom possessed in life is not permitted to pass with the soul toward whatever death really is, but cleaves to the mouldering corpse to fester and diminish even as flesh beneath the gentle nibblings of worms. Such perhaps is the reason dust from certain graves is valued in unlawful practices, and why necromancers are burned, lest the worms acquire arcane knowledge it is better they should not have. And such most certainly drove Snurd in secrecy through the high iron gate of Zulan-Thek, onto that dim, star-litten plain where they of Zulan-Thek were wont to inter their dead in dreams that died before men's wasted souls.

Of Snurd and his dubious parentage men once hinted unmentionable things, indicating as evidence that hitherto only the detestable ghouls and kindred horrors were known to inflict such enormities upon the dead. What, they inquired of one another in hushed voices, became of the fat miller before the sextons came, and who defiled Klotlei's grave and Shek's in the night? Then they would gesture knowingly but make no more lucid answer. Little did Snurd care! He knew how the bones were taken down from the high place where the camels passed from Gak, laden with bright silks and spices of exotic name, and where malefactors were displayed on a grisly hook set there for that purpose; only that morning they were taken and dragged by the muffled sextons whose duty it was, to the catacombs where their odour would not offend the camels. He guessed the nature of those crimes for which this penalty was exacted, and that all to some degree approximate witchcraft. And few knew better than Snurd what is written in Hsan's Cryptical Books.

He went out with only the stars to see: they of Zulan-Thek were fearful of their dead, and kept the Night securely bolted out of doors and peering vainly at shuttered windows. How the Night finally overcame these barriers to extinguish all the lamps and hope, does not concern this tale. Snurd feared neither darkness nor the buried dead. But leaping grotesquely in the deep shadows of



crumbling mounds, he ran his tongue over his pointed teeth in a hunger not often manifested by fully human persons. He remembered the screams of the carrion fowl flapping darkly in the gloom around the mewling bundle on the hook, and how the bundle lost its own tongue trying to charm the ravens from its eyes. Perhaps, ah, perhaps the avid beak could not wholly penetrate those bleeding sockets to the maddened brain. Perhaps it was still shut away within the clean-picked skull. . . . And Snurd laughed and leered at the frightened Moon.

It did not take him long to find that path the sextons used in their particular trade, for Snurd was more familiar than any sexton should have been with the startling ways of that path. The weeds there grew too quickly, and made little rustling noises even without the wind. But it was no business of Snurd's who stirred the weeds. He hurried over a confusing rise and between the huddled, leaning boulders, and moments ere the Dawn paled the East in wholesomer lands and the tides of Night receded, Snurd crept near to that vine-hidden stone door with the hippogryph on either side. The graven signs and expressions on the faces of those images were too worn to ascertain their correct meaning; but the swollen vines slithered quietly back at his approach, and Snurd passed through and down the fifty-seven lightless steps to those darker lower halls where it must be blasphemy that light should

ever come. Snurd had not that inconvenience of requiring light to see, and moved quickly and with improbable sureness over the floor slimed and worn smooth by the passage of nameless things and Time, disturbing the rats and less pleasant things with his breathing. The rats were whispering plots in the dark with uncouth scarabs. Once he spied a light beneath a secretive door. But something behind that door rattled its moldy claws and snarled, and made him think better of opening it. He came at last to a little unlighted vault and found where the sextons had deposited the leavings of that grisly hook. It was doubtlessly only his imagination that the pale skull *grinned* when Snurd entered the room. . . .

Thus ends the unhappy tale of Zhosph as recorded elsewhere, and told once by them of Zulan-Thek until the Night came with his retinue of shadows to feast in Zulan-Thek's palaces and fanes, attended by Fear: that when the sextons who carried Zhosph's bones returned to the hippogryph-guarded entrance on a matter of unfinished business, they found things not quite as they had left them. The faces of the hippogryphs seemed altered and strangely smug, and the vines misbehaved shockingly, deliberately tripping the frenzied rats as they fled madly from the catacombs, and strangling them in a manner the sextons did not like. But worse was the wailing in the depths that

had frightened the rats. One man later averred that it moaned disturbingly of something evil that should have been dead but scratched subtly in back of the mind, *changing* things for a purpose and tittering *within*. And certainly they all heard that tearing scream in the dark, and saw afterwards the queer little being with large ears that scampered up the dark stairs and made a terrible sign at them before drying its curious wings and fluttering back toward Zulan-Thek against the cryptic stars, to bargain with the Night.

When at last the sextons had conferred in bleak whispers and descended to that tiny room where they had left it, they found the skeleton of Zhosph the thaumaturge disturbed, the skull split like the rind of a pomegranate and the sorcerer's brain quite gone. This was attributed to the activities of rats, until later. One other thing they found which was less easily explained: a shrivelled yellowish membrane much as a serpent might leave in moulding, or the chrysalis of certain rare moths, not entirely recognizable as the skin of Snurd turned inside-out. The sextons did not pause long to ponder the riddle.

CHAPTER VI

The Three Enchantments

THE apprentice Lir is aged beyond even Wisdom's ripeness, and the wonderful memories he once possessed Time has long since snatched away. But the bright sand that flows down to the azure Cerenerian Sea below long wharves of teak he remembers still: where the turbaned fishers sit and mend their nets and watch the day pass flaming into the West with the first pale stars that follow, and where Lir came often as a little boy, to play upon the white sand and hear the quaint speech of the mariners. Lir was apprenticed to that very Dlareb who used to sell carpets in Lhosk, and had duties more pressing than to watch the ships sailing for fabulous ports where the sea joins the sky, as Dlareb was wont to remind him with his knotted stick; but Lir was only a small boy and loved the rose-tinted sails.

Here it was that once pausing in his solitary games, Lir spied a brightness half covered by the white sea-sand, and found that famous silver ball with its three cunning glyphs. The ball was tarnished and very old, but even very ordinary things cast up by the sea are objects of wonder when one is a very little boy; and the thoughts of Lir as he examined his treasure were far off with the drowned, perilous halls of that evilly aquatic One, dead Kthulhut to whom the frightened sailors allude only with furtive glances and meaningful nods, or the hoards of splendid galleons pulled down by the muttering waves. . . . And then Dlareb came by with his knotted stick, from discovering the family of round golden spiders busily spinning in the rolled, blood-coloured rug from remote Sona-Nyl, which Lir had neglected to sweep away. Instantly Lir forgot his prize to dodge his master's ill-aimed blows, and escaped back to Lhosk and the little shop of Dlareb, where he fell asleep hiding behind the rolled carpets, sorely perplexing the spiders.

And that rug-merchant only spat into the sea and muttered something under his breath very like a curse, and turned to hobble back to the high sea-wall and the city. But the lengthening shadows had long since allied themselves with Night ere ever he came home again or lit a little candle; and Lir rubbed the sleep from his eyes and peeped out from his hiding place to see what his master

was about, whether he was drunk, and perhaps to allay a little fear. And there was Dlareb with the sea still dripping from him, clutching that silver ball; but with subtle alterations in his manner, and something obviously terrible about his eyes; and the light on his puffy face was more than any single candle could account for. Then Dlareb took a burned stick and traced the least of the three glyphs on the blood-coloured carpet of Sona-Nyl. Lir covered his head with the ends of rugs and stuffed their corners in his ears.

When several of Dlareb's clients, those with unsettled accounts, fell ill with discomforts of the least pleasant description, there were those who said that certain dolls which the rug-merchant displayed in his shop-window strangely resembled these clients, who screamed of pains in precisely those places where bamboo splinters transfixed the dolls. Only the unimaginative remarked upon this odd coincidence, all others swore nervously and hurried away.

One morning the gulls flew perilously low above the broad towers and gambrel roofs of Lhosk, *away* from the fitful sea; people heard only a brief flurry of wings and the wind. But those who went to take out their boats were puzzled by his ominous migration of the gulls; and seeing also that peculiar aura around the Moon, they wondered. Some spoke of storms, but this explanation satisfied no



one when they remembered the colour of the Moon before it passed, and the shocking expression it had presented to the watchers.

Only four boats sailed with their nets and their crews from the long wharves of teak when the sun had attained a comfortable altitude. The others lay untended on the beach, while their owners watched from high up along the great seawall, murmuring snatches of half-remembered legends concerning the sleep of certain discreditable gods, or praying when the clouds began to assume a more definite shape. The sun climbed higher, and still they watched for the return of the boats. And when the sun began to fall all their little hopes went with it; the day passed with annoying speed behind the distant Tanarian hills, where in his jewelled palace at Celephais King Kuranos noted its shrunken appearance but did not inquire to the priests.

(Once out at sea the nets were cast and drawn back curiously slashed and gnawed; but the net of one boat was less easy to draw back, and men had scrambled frantically to cut it loose, and died horribly.)

Dreams were not pleasant that night, and the candles burned far into the small dark hours, and the morning did not bring the relief looked for. The shadow intruding into the fitful sea was a city beyond any doubt, and people were very grateful now for that white fog which had driven men mad for a glimpse of the clean sky, because it dis-

closed only shadows. In hushed taverns sailors whispered fearfully of what may be seen by moonlight in the queer waters six nights out of Baharna. Their listeners were not eager to leave, because of what had come out with the fog; squat rubbery things that were felt but seldom seen, wet things that came up Lhosk's winding streets from the sea. Nothing human skulked in the crooked sea-ward alleys, dragging unmentionable burdens, for nothing human slides plump tentacles behind it in the dark. And men wisely refrained from following their foul, slimy trails where they might have led them between the tottering sheds in the fog.

During this period few would have cared to notice how the rug-merchant had altered the singular display in his shop-window: the customary dolls were not there at all, but only the crude waxen images of nothing human, with long silver pins thrust into each uncouth belly in an undeniable pattern: each pin the vertex of a pentagon, or perhaps the point of a five-pointed star, which is sometimes more meaningful. But their maker was observed to be in a state of great unease, and had even overlooked the beating of Lir for some new truancy. Only once had Dlareb glanced at the stars in the vicinity of Orion, then screamed and gone to hide that blasphemous silver ball lest its Owner should send for it; if its Owner should

come personally he could not hope to escape. Then, mumbling pitifully to himself, he had molded those repellent little dolls. But even as he had worked the *changes* began, his body assumed that unhealthy flabbiness so loathsomely apparent later, and the other peculiarities that caused Lir to flee that little shop and never return.

Who found that unfortunate seller of carpets crouching grotesquely beneath a blood-coloured rug in his shop, is not remembered now. Certain horrible doubts were cast upon the identity of the corpse, because of the *scaliness* of the bloated features, and what had become of the hands. They attached no significance to those two curious glyphs drawn on the carpet with a burnt stick, or the third one done in blood, supposing that someone had slipped in with the Night for no better purpose than murder; though few reputable human assassins would ever resort to a method so dubiously effective as jabbing with many long silver pins. Having discussed these matters in hushed voices, they wound him in the blood-coloured rug and buried him with a scandalous lack of ceremony.

But it was not until they returned to close up Dlareb's shop that they realized whence the pins had come. Some wanted to burn those repellent little dolls, detesting the way they postured and leered, while others thought their sculpting somewhat less crude than it had been before. But the dolls only made odd squealing noises on the fire, and

had to be cast into the fitful sea beneath the fog-veiled stars.

Inscrutable are the ways of the gods, that men cannot hope to know. Even as the last of those effigies was cast into the muttering sea a gentle bubbling began, as if something with questionable intentions were laughing just beneath the surface. And so they moved away more quickly than they might otherwise have done, and never saw, until too late, what it was that crawled nastily behind them, its black, rubbery hide glistening wetly, across the beach and up the sheer sea-wall, slipping unobtrusively up the crooked alleys in the dark and the fog.

And only Lir, whose old head is decidedly queer because of something he has seen, can tell of that shocking *final* horror: what it was that wriggled out of the night to flop sickeningly over Dlareb's grave and open it with distasteful sucking noises; what snatched the struggling, screaming corpse from its secret burrow in the mud, and dragged it still gibbering and cursing back towards the shunned wharves and the seething, uncomfortable water; and how, hours later, both were drawn up into a weedy tower through a tiny lighted window, by something that bore a fiendish resemblance to the tentacle of a devil-fish.

CHAPTER VII

Hazuth-Kleg

OUT of the mocking shades of doubtful sleep slipped Sliph like only another shadow, to find the locked gate the sign on the stone had indicated. Sliph had beheld that sign in other dreams, and never chosen to disregard its cryptic warning, perceiving that it is unwise to act perversely when one knows not to whom he will have to answer later. But now he remembered the coral domes of antique Cathuria that departed the World long since, leaving only the stars in her place; he thought then of the bright pavilions, and perfumed gardens amid the ginkgo trees, and minstrels striking softly their little bells and playing sweetly their rosewood flutes; and of Matthew Phillips, whom Sliph had left dreaming in a little garret

in Providence, with only books and dreams to ward off madness until he might learn whither Cathuria has flown. And Sliph went down to the locked gate, for the city behind it is named on no maps but the charts wherewith hooded astrologers consult the rebellious stars.

The design of that gate is nothing more conventional than a lofty, tangled web of verdigris-mottled serpents whose eyes are too moist for amethysts. Sliph sat cross-legged beside the gate, where he would not have to abide too closely the fearful gaze of the eyes.

There came by at this time that evil old woman in black dragging her fiendish bundle and reeking nauseously of embalming spices, and the musk of unwholesome slimy things that creep beneath dank stones. Sliph could hear quite plainly what she prattled to herself, or perhaps for the speculated ears of something that stirred nastily in her sack. But when she pulled the latch-string and scuttled through the gate, he rose and slipped in behind her (and of course brushed that tiny silver cord which tinkles a little bell in a small chamber very deep underground, where there dwells all alone in the dark outside the World One who, on hearing that little bell, took up in its paw a silver pen, and began to write).

Then that old woman turned and leered at Sliph in her repellent fashion, and fluffed her long, shapeless sleeves

at him in gestures having clearly some reference to the stars. Sliph could not understand those gestures, but he guessed that they did not bode him any good. And when she actually bent to untie that disquieting sack, which was already snuffling towards him, he ran and hid behind a dune. And she only whistled for her sack, and hobbled away with it towards the watchful lamps of the city.

At what hour he knew only dimly, Sliph perceived the Night in his slinking retreat into the West and its mythical well, whence Night may come by legendary subterranean paths unto the East again. The stars sailed slowly, one by one, over the jagged edge of the World; and soon there were no more stars, for such jewels are the rightful possessions of Night only, and not of that grim twilight brooding eternally over the city. But Sliph thought not of these matters, only wondering why with Night flown the Day came not to usurp the empty sky. And he remembered the old woman's eagerness that he should note a certain star. For one pale star had never sought the abyss, but hung watchfully above the shadowy basalt towers. . . .

Meanwhile three figures were approaching him from the East. Sliph did not like the look of those figures, or the way one hopped queerly about on all fours when another prodded it. Their progress was silent and quick: Sliph did

not have to wait long before they had come beneath his dune, up the difficult slope of which he had already crept to watch the Night: he could even read the hieroglyphs on the yellow robe of that first Thing whose scaly muzzle was all drawn up in a horrible grin; its long retainer went wrapped in a winding sheet and drove the third along at the tip of an iron goad; of this last being it would not be tasteful to speak. The first made a sign to its fellows, and hissed at them through rows of disturbingly numerous teeth, "There was whispering among the stars tonight." "It is time, surely," quoth that long retainer. The third being said nothing at all, but tittered and wiped the spittle from its soft, flabby chin. Then all three stole off across the plain to the city and its terrible star. Sliph descended quietly and followed at a prudent distance, and in consequence lost them in an alley winding off the Street of the Tobacconists.

The streets of that city are dark, narrow and winding, and in too many places the bleak houses lean perilously to shut in the lonely ways and bring certain shuttered attic windows into frightful proximaty with the slippery cobbles. Houses all of tottering, grey, lichen-cruste*d* brick peer oddly through leaded panes, or mutter strangely with voices the wind ought not to have. Sliph detested the way

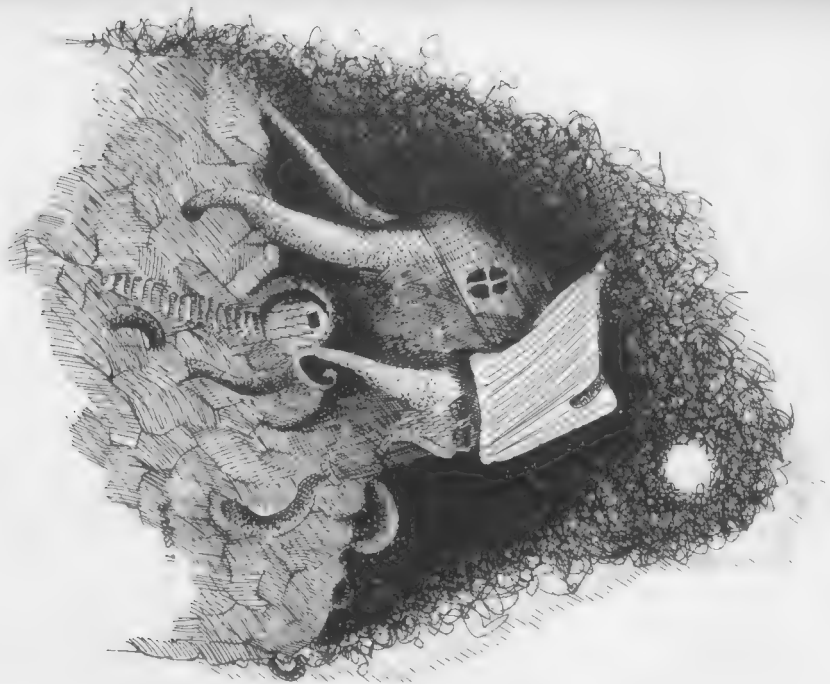
those houses edged away and made the streets confusing. Sometimes the shadowy lanes discovered broad courts opening on the sky, where the hollowed flags still bore sardonic astrological symbols and names of many infamous daemons, and names of some lesser known but infinitely more terrible. But Sliph did not care to linger in those dark, suspicious courts either, because the disquieting windows overlooking them were open and trailed ladders of braided rope. At last he came upon a small iron gate fashioned all too obviously by the same craft as the gate of bronze beyond the plain; but he would not approach too closely, seeing how the eyes were more skillfully made. Also Sliph did not want to disturb the Watcher on the other side of the little gate. This alarming personage squatted with its back to him, performing certain appalling rituals with a stick.

Beyond the Watcher's head and a little above what it used as a shoulder, Sliph looked out on a wide, cobbled avenue lit by the sinful red lamps of temples raised on either side to all disreputable gods whom men deny, foolishly supposing that worship could possibly matter to the gods. In Ulthar they have strange accounts of unlawful idols who provide their own sacrifices without any observance of the proper seasons or which of her houses the Moon occupies, and covet other flesh than goats'. In that

street also was a low, terrible house without any windows. Sliph noticed it first when a small, dark man with a jewelled sword and stealthy, slippered feet, left that low door and stole out into Pantheon Street on a business in which darkness and a fabulous gem figured not unimportantly.

After several minutes a second figure emerged from that same low, dreadful house . . . that evil old woman in black with her fiendish bundle. She seemed intent upon urgent matters, and scuttled towards the iron gate and cuffed the monstrous Watcher away; and that latter being only withdrew sulking and growling into a crack there was in the base of an onyx wall. Then she passed through the gate and down the narrow lane. But when Sliph turned to go out into the broad street with the temple lights, he found the Watcher already shifting its enormous bulk back into the proper position against the gate, which was shut. And fearing he might never find his way back through those winding lanes, dreading what might happen if he did not, Sliph hurried back in the one direction he most instinctively disliked: the one instinct said the witch had taken.

And just when the alleys had begun to play queer tricks with his sanity, he spied her muffled form only slipping around a corner, and that shapeless black sack shambling at her heels. But when he had hurried up to the place



where he had seen her, she was already gone. Then a candle was lit in an upper room by whatever pressed its face against the window-glass, and somewhere behind Sliph a door whose hinges were in a deplorable state, opened slowly. . . .

And in a broad court where madly sentient houses leaned shockingly away from something they feared, and queer, flapping shadows rustled their black wings in the light of that one hellish star, which now appeared to squat upon a windowless tower, chuckling and dangling tentacles listlessly, Sliph found the old woman. She stood on the fifth step of a hoary dais whose steps were all unmentionably defiled by the less orthodox names of Azathoth, wrought in tiny emeralds; bent over that lichened, blasphemous altar, crooning softly and making certain curious patterns with the entrails of a child. Something she read in the entrails seemed to please her, and she spat thrice upon the altar and shouted a Name.

There watched seated from the shadows, apathetically, three whom Sliph had already met on the plain. On hearing that shouted Name they crept to the foot of the hoary dais, and made an obeisance on their faces before that evil old woman lolling on the fifth step, and that sack bulging limply across her knees. The sack whispered a terrible thing in the old woman's ear, and she turned to glare at

Sliph and shake her head, saying only, "There, there," soothingly to her sack, and that perhaps Matthew Phillips, a name Sliph felt he should know for a reason no longer clear, had dined unwisely before sleep—

(Here that hidden recorder in the deep, dark, secret chamber, being thoroughly bored with the proceedings, laid aside its silver pen. And in the morning a charwoman entered a certain Providence garret after repeated unanswered knockings, and screamed at what she found there.)

CHAPTER VIII

The Loot of Golthoth

OVER the desert of Cuppar-Nombo and the city Golthoth, named by some the Damned, Night rose and shook his hoary wings. An evil twilight was creeping across the sky, with multitudenous waxing stars; hidden bats stirred uneasily in doubtful sleep; and in the painted wagons men lighted incense whose duty it was, and chanted the old songs, as they have always done at evening for the last four thousand years.

For a song and no more creditable reason the painted wagons came to Cuppar-Nombo. For though deceitful Time has concealed much behind the centuries, still those songs forget not the greatness of Golthoth's limestone temples and obelisks, nor any rumor of the arts whereby the cyclopean limestone blocks were moved, which is one

with the dust of architects. Very splendid still are Golthoth's temples, with their images and myriad columns spectral in that light which filters only at noon down through the shadowy fanes. There by little copper lamps the shaven priests mumbled once over papyrus scrolls before the cryptical gods: strange figures with human bodies and the heads of cats, hawks, rams and lions, and jackal-headed Anubis whos concern is with the dead. But the old gods and kings are unnamed for the last four thousand years, since a certain thing happened which even the songs dare not hint. Some have surmised a curse which the gods once spoke in anger and could never since recall. But the songs say only how after this certain thing the eyes and glyphic name of Anubis were chipped off the temple walls by the shaven priests, before the priests disappeared, and how he people fled their ancient, horrible city, screaming.

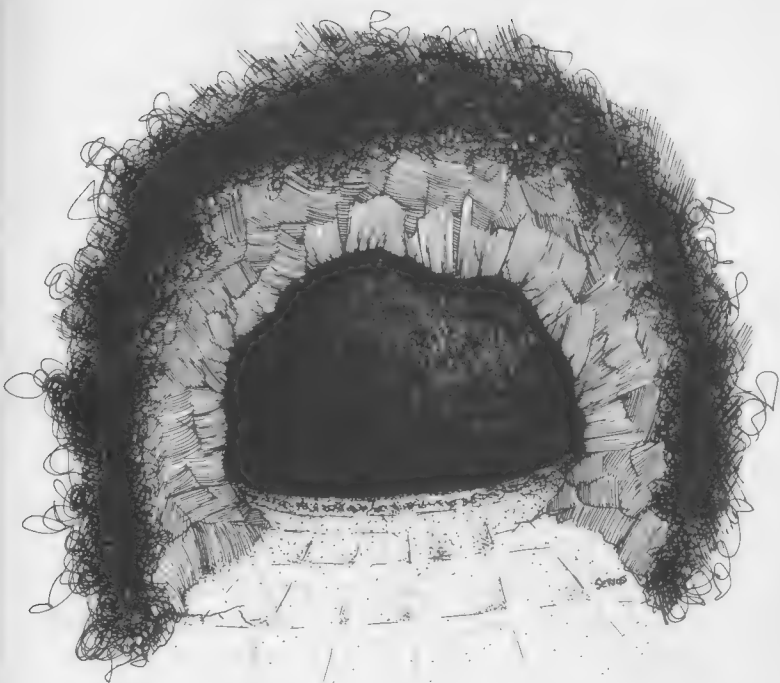
Now this certain thing was forgotten, for the songs made no mention of it, and the old gods slept. And in cities less ancient and horrible than Golthoth strange, dark wanderers began to think again of the opulence of their ancient kings all lonely in the desert, sentineled only by the lean jackals and their shadows. These people considered how one might spend so many emeralds, and the uses men have for gold. One morning the strange, dark wanderers were gone with their painted wagons from the

market places of cities where they told fortunes for silver and bought gay beads from the merchants, which displeased no one but the torturers and dispensers of justice who are not kind to thieves. When they came to Cuppar-Nombo the high walls were all blue with the evening.

Much has been sung of the wealth of the old kings. It was the intention of the dark people to come beneath the high tomb shaped, as was customary, like a pyramid, and to locate therein the hidden door such tombs are known to have. Among their number were several persons for whom familiarity had made the felonious arts of burglary wholly contemptable; and one wearing the head-dress with the two horns and a curious disk between the horns, who was not unlearned concerning cold guardians of tombs who have a deplorable appetite for the blood of venturesome thieves, and how most effectively to curb that appetite. Many had mattocks and spades. On Cuppar-Nombo in sight of the beautiful blue walls the burglars conferred with the priest, who consulted in turn the little ivory fetishes he had, and so determined that the enterprise so dear to all their hearts should begin with the first light of dawn. No one knows when Snid and Leshti and Loth decided upon their own enterprise, but for several days more than one person had missed a spade or mattock from among his personal belongings.

For Leshti and Loth were of course both notably fine thieves, but the deeds of Snid have become a matter of fable. When ever his name is mentioned men stop smiling and look to their shutters; jewellers who remember what became of the gnomes' opals, justly fear the deftness of his quick brown fingers; in a certain disreputable quarter of Celephais they wonder how once he appropriated, by means not entirely honest, the three unlikely ruby coffers and the key to the Vaults of Zin, all in a single night's work. It is therefore not surprising that the plan should have occurred to Snid. And the plan was not at all uncongenial to Messrs. Leshti or Loth.

When those three conspiritors left the watch-fires in front of the painted wagons the stars were already out, still nobody saw them steal away into the shadows. Perhaps someone did see a lean, crouching shape slipping suspiciously just past the edge of sight, noticed hardly at all, while elsewhere one overheard the crack of a pebble (or was it only the fire?) and a little breeze rattling in the grass. But of course it was neither Snid nor Leshti nor Loth—who were much too subtle—for they had already gotten as far as the secret path which men never made, that goes furtively down along Golthoth's dizzy walls, past the pits there are on the far side, and thence by devious ways down into that valley where the three hoped to find and loot the high tomb. They would not enter that



ancient, horrible city, for Snid had spent many hours in pondering the old songs and his plan, and it seemed to him not improbable that the old gods who slept might also dream. And Snid had his reasons for not wishing to meet any dream of the gods. So they came, those three thieves with their mattocks and spades and the three zebras brought for a purpose, which Snid had concealed in his wagon so cunningly that *no one even suspected*, the zebras on whose backs they hoped to bear away their loot to Drinen, thereby confounding their tribe; so they came down that old forgotten path between the crumbling lesser tombs, and found at last that which of all things the thieves had least reason to expect: the high tomb was not there!

So Leshti fell down weeping, and Loth would have thrown himself upon his sword; but Snid only sat dejectedly upon a stone, biting his nails and considering how things were not going at all as he had planned.

Now it no longer made any difference to Snid why the name and painted eyes of Anubis (and not sinful Nyarlathotep, who has no eyes) were effaced by the vengeful priests, for his reputation was at stake. Nor was he ever one to leave perfectly valuable sapphires lying in a desert. But Snid was having uncomfortable suspicions about what a certain thing that had left Golthoth desolate may have been; and had he not his reputation to think of, he

might almost have slipped quietly back to the watch-fires before anyone there even realized that Snid had been away. Then avarice got the better of him. Never telling the younger thieves what he feared, he made instead some likely reference to wind and sand and Time: for the Desert, as he said to Leshti and Loth, was always jealous of his secrets, and there were four thousand years to be considered. Then those notable thieves took heart, and lighted the copper lanthorns they had, knowing that no one who spies strange red lights out in the desert at night is likely to investigate, and unpacked their spades and mattocks. And there beneath the stars, under Snid's shrewd direction, they set about their heroic project, the unearthing of the high pyramid tomb which the desert was inhospitably concealing.

They worked very quickly in the starlight, driven by sheer avarice. Still Leshti and Loth were not happy as they dug; though when the oddly moist clay began to assume an unhealthy shade that was not reassuring, they said it was only the red beams of their lanthorns, and dug stoutly on. The cleverly muffled spades made less noise than their breathing, they heard the jackals draw near with terrible smiles, and heard them whine nervously as they slunk away with their shadows and tails between their legs. But Snid would only scoff at omens. And when the thieves had dug down to the depth of a grave, they

uncovered three small diorite cubes bearing an exceedingly peculiar inscription on five of the six polished faces of each, and the sign of the five-pointed star. These Snid eyed perplexedly for several minutes, then cast from him in revulsion, muttering something about their being of little market value. Still he would not admit that it might be as he feared, for his reputation was at stake. But much later even Snid could not hide his unease, for they all loathed the way that viscid, quivering mud clung to their spades and crept and bubbled noisomely, and the horrible way it ate holes in their boots.

Now when evening comes the dark wanderers sing the old songs no longer, and light incense only to conceal a certain terrible odour which has haunted their wagons since the morning, long ago, when they fled from Cuppar-Nombo. They have since tried to explain that odour away in view of what they now know to have happened, but of the way the ground beneath the painted wagons behaves at evening they never speak. Once a man admonished them to return to the worship of the old gods who sleep, and to offer sacrifice to Anubis lest the World *swallow them as well*; but they slew him with a curious rite and buried him beneath one of the wagons where the ground acted strangely. It is many years since the burgesses of Ulthar have heard any rumour of the dark wanderers.

This is what the dark people found on that morning they came down between the crumbling lesser tombs, to the place where they looked to find the high tomb of their hearts' desire: a lonely crouching shape that snarled and laughed and scrabbled in the dust, whom they recognized as Snid by the little lines of greed about the eyes. But there was very little human in those eyes now, and even less in the ghoulish aspect of the face. And observing then the spades and mattocks where they had been laid, and the three dead zebras, they guessed what Snid had planned, and searched his pockets to learn whether he had found the treasurer of the old kings. But there were only some white finger-bones, a number of teeth, and a portion of somebody's femur. They wondered at the freshness of those pitiful osseous relics, and at the hideous way Snid leered at them and laughed and called them by name. No recognizable traces of Leshti or Loth were ever found.

Yet despite these queer portents the dark people would have begun an excavation of their own. Only after they saw how the earlier digging had not been filled in, as they had supposed, but had closed up in a horrible *smile*, did they drop their implements and hurry judiciously away.

CHAPTER IX

The Four Sealed Jars

THERE are things in the shop of Getech that they bring in by the back door and do not display openly. On that counter loll many curious gods of wood and jade and gold, having benign smiles; and there are chests of camphor wood; and that very crystal once spoken of in connection with a name grown mythical, exorbitantly priced for showing things no crystal ought to show; and the beautiful iridescent silks of that which some name the spider and some the worm, and some say neither of these. The selection of their spices is unmatched even in song. In a locked room near the back are kept the several poisons that shop has for sale, and certain exotic powders they will not sell you elsewhere, save perhaps the Moon, and whose use is punished strangely.

One dreams sometimes of how the stars light the squat cottages where the green hill of Nithey-Vash falls away. The thatches of those cottages go all silver with the starlight, and the lamps they light within turn the lozenge panes one by one into jewels, they are more beautiful than the silent houses whose windows overlook the edge of the World. On this night Wesh saw them from his own window, and conceived a longing: Wesh longed in his soul to see what the Night was like in those pleasant little streets between the cottages. . . . The watchmen opened their dark lanterns and did not smile when Wesh walked past the gate the watchmen watch.

And perhaps the streets conspired against him as he walked, for too quickly the star-lit cottages were hidden behind high walls of ugly brick, and the paths twisted and would not go in any of the proper directions. The bleak warehouses on either side of him confined the Night to a narrow channel overhead—even the stars were changed—and Wesh despaired of ever finding the little cottages. But turning a corner he spied a dim light far off in the dark before him, and hurried on.

That shop bearing Getech's mark on its iron lintel is very lean and high, and set between two tottering old houses with no lamps in their windows, that wear an evil look. But there was little comfort in certain menacing shapes in the shop-window either. Only one twinkling

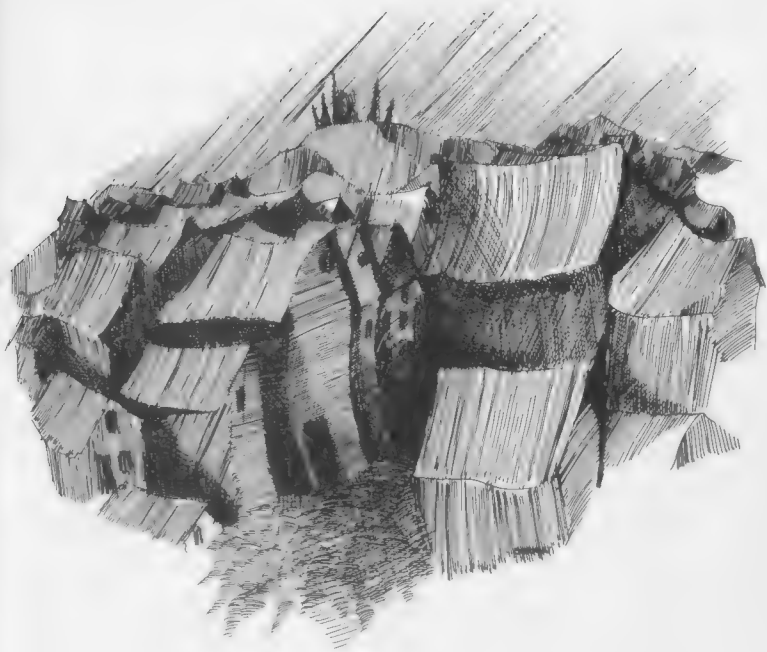
eye of a quaint little jade god recalled the stars Wesh had seen from his own window. . . . A bell rang when Wesh opened the door. He had already examined three wonderful dusty tomes bound all in copper (whose pages were closely writ in bestial characters he was unable to decipher), and nodded as he passed the amethyst cups, and was picking up from the counter an ivory daemon, when someone behind him uttered a cough. And the proprietor peered up into the face of Wesh with watery little eyes and made him eagerly welcome.

Only those sinful eyes and the top of a nasty bald head showed above those black wrappings many sizes too large for him; but seeing them made Wesh remember an appointment he did not have, and turn to go. Then that gnomish being plucked at his sleeve and smiled.* There was really no reason to be nervous, the proprietor only wished to see that Wesh's curiosity was wholly satisfied. Would he not examine the wares of that shop more closely? But when Wesh would have inquired after the price of the quaint little jade god he had seen in the window, the proprietor only hurried him through the dim aisles to a dark little room near the back, which he unlocked, and urged Wesh through the door.

That room was empty but for four jars and the long, lidded wooden box propped in a corner. To that suspicious

*Some wrinkles in the wrappings curled up at the ends.

box the proprietor hopped, and began to fumble the iron padlocks. And even before the first lock fell Wesh noticed something very peculiar about those jars: three of those bulging earthenware jars were making tiny noises, disturbingly like bats or the tapping of somebody's fingernails; but the fourth jar was empty, and Wesh did not entertain his idle fancies about the proprietor and the suggestive emptiness of that jar for long. And when the second lock fell he asked what the sealed jars might contain; but the proprietor would only say, cryptically, "Better not ask," and laugh at some private jest. Then the third lock fell, the lid opened noiselessly, and Wesh saw the golden mask which the occupant of the box was wearing. One gravely doubted whether either could be described gracefully. The proprietor snatched the mask from the mouldering face and held it so that Wesh might see more clearly, and thrust a finger at him through one of the narrow eyes. This article, the proprietor averred, was rumoured by some to have certain properties which might be of interest to philosophers, and had been invoked upon only four occasions since that evil One who made it gave it unto the World. He knew nothing of the first three owners, save that the third had died insane two centuries ago; the fourth had been a poet and flung the mask away in an alley in Celephais and sliced both his wrists. And always the mask returned to the Guardian that One had



set over it, the Occupant of the Box. He would not tell how it came into his shop. But the properties which rumour attributes to the golden mask are nothing less than to reveal to men the shapes of their own souls.

The look in the proprietor's watery little eyes was not pleasant as Wesh counted out the price into that eager palm, or left that shop with a parcel under his arm. He found his way back to the streets he knew without further incident. But once he heard a soft scuttling noise on the cobbles behind him, as something black with bandages on its wrists laughed and slipped down a storm drain.

But now a greyness was in the East, and dawn like a pale smoke rose to eclipse the stars. It was the hour when the watchmen put out their lamps and steal home in the shadows, and the things whose home is Night go secretly to hide by day in cupboards and unlighted places, and wholesomer persons rise to open their shops and go about their business. But there would be no morning for Wesh, who was already beginning to notice strange things about the streets he knew. He should have been in the neighbourhood of that temple wherein Nath-Horthath is glorified in Nithy-Vash, almost he heard Night muttering in the temple's shadowy portico; but the patter of his footsteps seemed oddly misplaced. Now rows and rows of bleak warehouses peculiarly altered, the ways grew darker, and into those narrow aisles between not even the stars

peeped. Wesh hurried on with his parcel, all the while mumbling to himself, "What if—?" and cursing because the alleys were pinching shut behind him. Such occurrences, as Wesh well knew, are not wholly sane; but when he considered the only alternative to his own madness, he fervently hoped he was going mad. Bricks should not smell of leather and mould, bricks should never arrange themselves with such damnable suggestiveness, until they cannot be discerned from rows and rows of dusty books whose bestial characters Wesh now was very glad he could not read. An ivory daemon on the counter leered at him. . . .

That same morning, four sealed jars from the shop of Getech came into the possession of a prominent merchant of Celephais who fancied himself a connoisseur of old wines and hoped by this purchase to add something diverting to his cellars. There was some unpleasantness when his servants effected an opening of one of the jars.

CHAPTER X

The Maker of Gods

IT SHOULD also be said of the shop of Getech, that in the left-hand window long sat, and perhaps is sitting still, a last uncollected masterpiece by none other than Yah-Vho. It is a little idol in jade, with two eyes; the crowning achievement of his early anthropomorphic period. In his modest studio in a by-way of Nithy-Vash, Yah-Vho lived and worked for years and years; and the lava-carvers of Ngranek knew of him, and wept.

Yah-Vho, who made many gods, worshipped only Yop, a little idol he had carved in his own image out of diorite. But Sthood was an idol altogether too horrible to be worshipped by men. His priesthood had been initiated solely to prevent men from offering prayers to Sthood,

lest Sthood be wakened by their prayers, and perform a miracle. Sthood had performed only three miracles since he was carved out of sandstone, concerning which no records survive; but the last was to create men. But Zith was not adverse to extortion, and knew that it would be worth much to the priests of Sthood to keep silent the prayers of Zith.

So he put on soft slippers and pittered out under the stars, from shadow to shadow up the cobbled lane, till he came to the temple of Sthood; and entered to see that god dreaming like an onion, on the high sheer pedestal where no prayers reach, where Sthood had dreamed five million years before men came and built his temple around him, and where, if the prayers of men are heeded, he would dream five million more. And Zith quietly strangled the priest whose duty it was to see that none offered prayers to Sthood. Then uncoiling that slender rope with the hook on the end, he cast the hook neatly about the lumpy throat of Sthood, nimbly he leapt up the rope. And that bulbous idol reeled forward beneath the weight of the thief. . . .

And things might have gone less badly for Zith had he been slower to spring away when that toppled idol crashed to the brazen flags, for then he would never have had to meet those whom the startled echoes had summoned. They did with that unhappy thief that which is better not to

tell; and afterwards shut themselves away all night with the strangled priest and some pieces of Sthood, to cast certain dreadful runes and recall their god's soul from the abyss whither it had flown; and in the morning went to see Yah-Vho.

They found him sweeping clouds of powdered marbles and flecks of gems out of his modest studio. And what gods had sprung from the marbles and gems whose sparkling dust it was, who knoweth? He laid aside his broom, and they spread before him a roll of new parchment disturbingly shaped like Zith, whereon were traced the outrageous lineaments of the god which Yah-Vho was to carve.

And Yah-Vho explained to them how it was not fashionable in that part of the Dreamlands for an idol to look so like an onion as theirs; and the priests pointed again to their plan. Again Yah-Vho looked at the plan, and frowned; but said that eyes were just the thing, pointing out that he had instock just then a few suitable emeralds.* And they said that for Sthood to have eyes was unheard of, and muttered terrible things against emeralds. Then he asked what sort of stone, and they said sandstone. And Yah-Vho resumed his sweeping to show

*His imitations in paste defy detection; they are classic, the model offered to students of the art.

that the audience was over, because he could not adequately express his contempt for worshippers of an idol of that sort. And they named a certain figure, in opals.

So Yah-Vho procured what was necessary. And on the following morning those three high priests returned, all in their figured robes, with tripods and charcoal braziers and wonderful resins. But the strangled priest who came in behind the subservient high priest wore no robe, and the body was ill-suited to its hideous soul. Yah-Vho was not happy about the knavish eyes he perceived were watching him through holes the ill-fitting soul had rubbed in the body; but the body's eyes regarded him not at all, having already been hooked out to accomodate that terrible soul. But this was none of Yah-Vho's affair. He mounted the step-ladder and began vigorously to chip away the stone that imprisoned Sthood; and the high priests chanted, "O Sthood, Sthood," and burned their wonderful resins.

And every evening just as the stars came out they left that modest studio, and every morning just as the stars began to pale they came quietly back to resume their chanting, and always that strangled priest followed them. And whether Yah-Vho worked that day or whether he worked not, the high priests came and chanted all the same.

Now the clientele of any reputable idol-carver are by



nature given to such practices, and to discourage them is not good business. But after the first week Yah-Vho came to suspect an ulterior motive for burning the wonderful resins; for the strangled priest had a bad way with the air which it must have seemed expedient to conceal, lest someone ask pointed questions.

But it would not be fair to Yah-Vho to write that ever he came to regret a bargain from mere squeamishness. The limitations of sandstone were starting to chafe him. Yah-Vho had his little ways with gold, could hollow it and weight it with just the exact amount of lead; but with sandstone you could overcharge and no more, and Yah-Vho considered that the high priests were cheating him of his rightful profits. And their demands upon his time could only be hurtful to business. Who now would finish the little jasper image of Mup? The acolytes of Tamash would come for the six golden attendant daemons of Tamash, and how would it be if they found their daemons without eyes? The iconoclasts continued to blackmail him, and what tasks could he set them now? And the dull orange dust of Sthood choked him and turned the beaded sweat of his brow to blood, and clouded forever after the flecks of gem that had sparkled in Yah-Vho's black beard.

Thrice in the midst of his labours he turned and threw

his chisel at their heads, crying out that their parsimonious opals were not adequate to the magnitude of his effort; and thrice the high priests only smiled, cheerfully agreeing to raise their figure. They only smiled, but almost Yah-Vho detected something unpleasant about their smiles. And when he saw that they intended to answer his every demand with those same smiles, he wept and prophesied ruin.

Upon a day the last deft touches were put to that hateful idol. Yah-Vho, soothed somewhat by the completion of his task and the promise of opals, covered his handiwork with a sheet, and went down to the wine shops of the city to wash the dust from his throat. The high priests watched him go, and smiled.

And a little while past midnight, three high priests and a strangled priest slipped out of the darkened temple of Sthood, observed only by the Moon; and stepping very carefully around the rectangles of yellow lamplight that fell from the shaded windows, made their stealthy way to Yah-Vho's modest studio. After several hours only the high priests went away, holding folded handkerchiefs over their noses.

When the maker of gods left the wine shops in the small dark hours of morning, and returned to his modest studio, he found first the broken lock on his doorstep, and

then the door creaking subtly open. Three pairs of sandalled feet had tracked a foulness across the floor of that evil-smelling studio, and out into the night; someone had taken the sheet off that hateful idol, and tried to hide that noxious spreading puddle on the floor. Three trails led away, but that sinister bulge under the sheet might almost have suggested human bones. Very carefully, with thumb and forefinger, Yah-Vho drew back one corner of the sheet. . . . Then he turned, and almost dropped his lamp.

For Yah-Vho knew that there is something very wrong with any image whose bulbous stone is noisomely soft and plump, wholly unlike what one comes to expect of sandstone; the ring of fleshy pink horns about the mouth glistened moistly, and something wet dribbled down the neck. And Yah-Vho turned to run.

But Yah-Vho did not turn quickly enough, and his tiny incessant screams continued for many minutes after the idol proceeded to devour him.

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Gary Myers is a native of South Gate, California, where he has lived his entire life. He is a self-proclaimed pessimist with "disappointingly ordinary dreams," a remarkably modest self-appraisal in view of his talent for creating boldly imaginative fiction. He can write only by sunlight and enjoys walking. Other interests include reading fantasy for pleasure and copying the fiction of Lord Dunsany.

It was the discovery of the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft that prompted Mr. Myers to compose the episodes that are collected in *The House of the Worm*. Since writing this book he has earned his B.A. in art from the University of Redlands. Sonnets by Gary Myers have appeared in *The Arkham Collector*.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

The cover artwork and illustrations in this book are the work of Allan Servoss. Mr. Servoss is a native of Great Falls, Montana. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Montana in 1970 before moving to Wisconsin where he taught for several years. Since 1974 he has been living in Campbelltown, Australia, a suburb of Sydney. Besides teaching art on the high school level, Mr. Servoss conducts pottery-making classes in night-school and plays his guitar at a local restaurant. Mr. Servoss is also an accomplished photographer.

